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Abstract

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Portfolios across the Curriculum: Whole School Assessment in Kentucky

LIZABETH BERRYMAN AND DAVID R. RUSSELL

Uhis article is the result of a two-year teacher/researcher collaboration between Liz, an experienced high school English teacher, and David, a university researcher in writing across the curriculum. First Liz will describe the experience of the school we studied. Then David will present some reactions of teachers to the experience. Finally, we'll comment together on what we learned. ■ **Liz:** When the Kentucky Supreme Court declared the public education system unconstitutional in 1989 and the legislature passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) to revamp the existing system, every Kentucky

teacher became involved in the broadest reform ever attempted by any state in the nation. As part of the reform, a yearly state-wide performance-based assessment of each school was instituted in 1991. Along with other components, the assessment included a writing portfolio, holistically graded by teachers in each school, that would count 14 percent in the total assessment (amended to 11 percent in 1998).

What, the English teachers asked, would this writing portfolio be? Collecting a portfolio of student writing and grading student writing holistically were not new ideas, and many of us English teachers had been using similar strategies for years. However, the standard portfolio and statewide grading rubrics were a bit much to comprehend all at one time, along with the rest of the complex reform.

Moreover, we English teachers heard that the portfolio was designed to improve the quality of student writing in general by moving pedagogy across the curriculum toward more student-centered focus and "real-world" writing. We heard that the portfolio was an assessment of the writing instruction of every Kentucky school, not only English classrooms. But the reform was so massive and the time for implementing it so limited that little pro-

fessional development was available for teachers. In the panic to design, collect, revise, and compile the portfolio in those first years, the purpose of the portfolio was lost. Only some years later did the teachers in our school discover the possibilities it held for our teaching and the students' learning. We found that portfolios across the curriculum could have long range benefits for our school through collaborative portfolio assessment from *all teachers*. But in 1991 all that was apparent was that suddenly we English teachers were handed additional work to do.

At Paul Laurence Dunbar High in Lexington, Kentucky, we English teachers first suspiciously viewed the portfolio as just another "new" idea that would go the way of many other innovative educational projects that are introduced every few years by our state educational department. According to the state guidelines, each senior in the state (as well as students in grades four and eight—later changed to grade seven) would complete a portfolio of their writing across the curriculum. The twelfth grade portfolio would consist of six pieces (later reduced to five): a table of contents, a letter to the reviewer, a personal experience piece, a literary (creative writing) piece, and—this was a new idea for many teachers—two "transactive" pieces, writing to communicate with a

real-world audience. And the biggest innovation of all—at least two pieces had to be from a content area other than English to encourage writing across the curriculum. Even more surprisingly, instead of sending the portfolios off to be scored by some testing company, we English teachers would assess them!

We would assign to each portfolio one of four performance levels: Novice, Apprentice, Proficient, and Distinguished. We would use a standard holistic scoring guide developed by a statewide committee of teachers. Six criteria would guide us: purpose/audience, idea development/support, organization, sentences, language (word choice and usage), and correctness. No portfolio would receive a lower score solely on the basis of correctness—to keep the emphasis on communication, not merely grammar rules. To achieve consistency across schools, the portfolio scoring from each school could be audited by a state panel of teachers who had proved to be consistently accurate scorers. Eventually every school would be audited.

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Finally, teachers learned that the stakes were high for schools but low for students. If the students in our school, on average, showed improvement on the portfolio and the other assessment components over a two-year period, our school could get financial rewards, as the goal of the reform was to improve *all* the schools, not simply reward those that were already good. If significant improvement was not demonstrated over a two-year period, a school could receive sanctions. The students were required to submit a complete portfolio to graduate—but there was no minimum score required. The goal was to assess the whole school's writing program over

time, not individual students—or even the English department alone.

Sharing Responsibility for Writing

The writing portfolio was the one area of the statewide assessment where we English teachers thought we could easily improve students' scores and demonstrate our expertise. We simply assumed that the responsibility for the portfolio would fall to the English department. English meant writing, didn't it? Therefore, we accepted as fact that we would have our seniors compile the required portfolio in a few weeks, and then we could go about our business of teaching literature!

This seemed to make sense. In our school most teachers in other disciplines taught their content without using writing much as a learning tool. Most of them used writing to test learning: traditional research papers and perhaps traditional essays, often as a supplement to a multiple choice exam. There was very little writing with a purpose beyond demonstrating learning or an audience beyond the teacher as examiner. There was little *transactive* writing, as we learned to call writing for communication—the kind of writing that was necessary for our students to do well on the portfolios. Even in our English classes, writing assignments were often the traditional literary essays: “Compare the play *Romeo and Juliet* to the musical *West Side Story* in character, setting, and plot” or “How does *Beowulf* embody the characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon hero?” We, the overworked English department, grudgingly accepted the job of having our seniors compile portfolios, without thinking much about our colleagues in other departments.

In the spring, a team of English teachers went through the state-mandated scoring training and graded the students' portfolios, which were then sent to the team of outside scorers for auditing. Imagine our surprise when the scores that first year were mostly Novice (the lowest ranking) with a scattering of Apprentice, Proficient (the KERA goal), and Distinguished. Surprise turned to dismay over the next three years, as our scores did not demonstrate a significant improvement. We could not figure this out. Our school is a large suburban high school with a very capable staff of highly motivated teachers, a knowledgeable and supportive administration, a strong professional environment, and a strong academic student body. Many of us English

teachers had written district-wide writing curricula, taught workshops on the writing process, and spent many hours with our students on writing. In short, the English department was working hard! It was meeting students' needs. Then why were our students' scores on this type of assessment close to the bottom?

In retrospect, the cause of the problem seems obvious. The English department's emphasis in those early days was on compiling the portfolio, helping students revise existing pieces (especially those from other disciplines), record-keeping, checking to make sure portfolios were complete—"just getting the damn thing done"—so we could go about the business of teaching English. For the content area teachers it was a matter of assigning "that one portfolio writing piece" and getting it to the English department (in whatever condition) so they could get back to the business of "teaching the content." In retrospect, it's clear that the teaching staff (English and others) did not understand that the goal of portfolio assessment, in actuality, was improving writing instruction—and learning—in all Kentucky schools by all teachers in all classes. The school had nothing in place that would really address this issue.

In the summer of 1994 I attended a voluntary three-day summer workshop, conducted by Sharon Hatton, the Department of Education writing consultant for our region, where teachers from across the state analyzed student portfolios. In that setting, with the luxury of large blocks of time devoted to discussing student writing with other teachers, I realized for the first time that scoring portfolio pieces could be a way to rethink teaching and learning, define weaknesses, and establish an instructional plan for a department or schoolwide effort. It became clear to me that my school's portfolio pieces were definitely lacking in authentic purpose and audience—the first criterion.

The subject area teachers did not understand what transactive writing was or how to implement writing in their classrooms as a tool for learning, rather than for assessment only. Subject area teachers (many of us in English) hadn't imagined the vastly varied forms of writing students could use to help them learn a subject and communicate to real-world audiences. Teachers didn't share a language of writing, a common set of terms for talking about writing. Many subject area teachers hadn't even viewed one of the compiled portfolios. We in English just as-

sumed that, because they were teachers, they should know how to teach writing.

It was a rather large epiphany. I came to the conclusion that English departments could no longer be the sole responsible body that assigns and collects pieces and manages the entire portfolio, while the whole school can be rewarded (or sanctioned) on its merit. If this portfolio was designed to improve the writing instruction in our whole school, all departments should be investing their time, effort, and pride in the process. But, how to do this? How to inform all teachers of the process? How to get teachers from every department to invest in a philosophy so different from the existing one? There was one inescapable answer. Every teacher must learn about student writing in order to improve it.

Whole School Portfolio Assessment

In the spring of 1995, I proposed that the entire high school faculty—not just a team of English teachers—score the writing portfolios. The goal was that *all* teachers would take ownership for the writing assigned for the portfolio and take responsibility for improving student writing in their own courses and disciplines. If teachers understood the holistic scoring system (purpose, audience, etc.) and saw student writing from other courses, they might discover how their own classroom writing tasks could improve and how they could get their students to enter into a deeper level of critical engagement with the course material through writing. That, after all, was the goal of the whole reform.

With the students' scores still low, it did not take much convincing for the administration and department chairs to agree that all of us teachers should score the portfolios, not just English teachers. Every administrator, counselor, media specialist, and resource teacher would receive training and score portfolios. (The math department was dealing with its own portfolio and was excluded from the scoring.) It would be a *whole school portfolio assessment*.

That summer, the faculty, administration, and staff spent twelve hours in professional development training, reading and discussing samples of student writing in terms of the writing concepts on the scoring guide. (Having a real-world purpose and audience for school writing was a radical idea to many!) The whole faculty and staff discussed student writing in a wide range of content areas and forms—from poetry to laboratory reports. We especially looked at

the “exemplar portfolios” used for scoring training, which illustrate sustained performance at each of the four levels. We spent a great deal of time using the materials to actually score sample portfolios.

It was also a time for building camaraderie among the departments. We laughed, joked, and ate good food during the training. Our school has always believed that offering food during trials and tribulations makes the work easier. We offered continental breakfasts, sit-down lunches (complete with white tablecloths and centerpiece arrangements), and afternoon snacks. We enjoyed the days in spite of their being required.

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At the end of the training sessions, my colleagues from across the curriculum had generally favorable comments: “So, this is what you wanted us to do!” “This is not so difficult; we can do this,” and the one I especially liked, “My assignments have been all wrong. Now I know what you want.” The staff had a sense that they could score student writing. But would there be changes in teaching and learning with writing?

It was obvious throughout that next school year that many (though by no means all) teachers’ awareness was raised about writing. A number of teachers revised or created new assignments to include writing. Several took a further step to make their assignments grow out of their curriculum and advance their course goals. In general, the staff began to talk the language of the scoring guide when they discussed student writing—purpose, audience, idea development/support, and voice, as well as spelling, grammar, and punctuation. The social studies teachers even posted the scoring guide in their classrooms for reference during discussions with students about writing.

When scoring time came in April, the whole faculty and staff gathered two afternoons after school

and divided up into thirteen mixed-discipline teams of six, with an English teacher or experienced scorer functioning as a table leader, to discuss borderline portfolios, handle paperwork, and so on. Thus, we English teachers, who had guided the students in compiling the portfolios, did not actually score them, unless there was a difference among scorers or a portfolio posed special difficulty. We divided the 380 senior portfolios into thirteen stacks and conducted three rounds of scoring. This meant that each portfolio was scored a minimum of three times by three different scorers over the two afternoons of scoring.

After that first session the comments were varied. Some content-area teachers were touched by the personal writing of the students, that incidents from their personal lives were shared in such depth. Some were impressed with the creativity demonstrated by so many. However, some were intimidated by the poetry and not sure how to score it. Many were dismayed when they saw that papers written for their own class assignments were included in a portfolio and scored as weak. Overall, subject-area teachers were surprised at how much they learned about their students by reading their writing across the curriculum.

As the scoring continued, it became clear that it was certainly the single most important professional development the faculty had that year, or perhaps any year: the faculty moving toward the goal of all teachers, using writing as a learning tool in their classrooms. Though a few days of training and one year of experience do not make writing a part of every classroom, at least all teachers had some basic tools now—more than they’d ever been given before.

The results of collaborative portfolio assessment by teachers across the curriculum were many. Some were predictable; some were startling. One surprising outcome was how accurately subject-area teachers can score student writing, after some training. The Kentucky Department of Education periodically has an “audit” team of teachers, who have proven reliability as scorers, take a sample of portfolios and rescore them to check for consistency across schools. The statewide rate is 75 percent exact agreement. We at Dunbar had an 86 percent exact agreement that first year of whole school assessment. Teachers across the curriculum can be reliable readers of student writing when they get adequate training and collegial support.

As we English teachers worked with our colleagues, we could feel them developing a sense of

confidence about evaluating writing. One science teacher who was worried and resistant when she began said:

Last year after we actually . . . sat down and graded the portfolios, I was surprised at how well I was able to do on it. I liked the idea of having the English teacher sitting there that I could hand [a difficult portfolio] to if I just went, "Holy cow, what do I do with this?" I could hand it to her and she could, you know, be my back up. But after grading last year I thought, "Well, you know, I think maybe I know what I'm doing."

David:

During the second year of whole school assessment, I interviewed twenty-six teachers from across the curriculum, primarily from science and technology, and did some follow-up interviews over the next year.

I found a wide range of responses, from teachers who did not assign writing and resented having to assess portfolios, to teachers who felt that writing had revolutionized their whole classroom approach. Overall, teachers were positive about the changes. There quickly developed a critical mass of teachers in each department committed to making it work, and as time goes on, others (though never all) are finding useful things for their teaching as a result of whole school portfolio assessment.

Professional Development through Whole School Assessment

Ultimately, improving teaching and learning through writing is the point of the portfolio, and that means changing teaching and curriculum for the long run—professional development. The portfolio assessment was specifically designed to encourage professional development, to produce positive "washback" from assessment, rather than the all-too-common negative results of assessment, where teachers teach to a test, and valuable curriculum and teaching are crowded out. Unlike many professional development efforts, this one engaged teachers with one another in regular conversations about student writing and learning.

For most teachers I interviewed, reading and discussing student writing with others increased their level of knowledge and comfort about teaching with writing. One technology teacher said, "I think it helps me as a teacher. If I were never involved in this I might not be able to relate to the stu-

dent as well . . . You know it gives me some things to use in my classroom that help them be better writers." A science teacher found she knew "more of what to look for." She continued:

I think probably the thing that helped me the most was actually sitting down last year and grading portfolios. Because then I got to read what was in the portfolios . . . I saw some really good ones. I saw some that weren't so good, so that gave me a better idea of what I needed to look for. The [science] content wasn't a problem. I knew what to do for that, but as far as the way these kids put the papers together, it really helped me reading over the ones from last year. . . . I feel a whole lot more comfortable with assigning writing assignments in my class because I know more what to look for, not just the subject content, but the whole writing process. I know what to do.

More teachers began to work with students to improve the writing and viewed writing as a process they could become involved in, rather than assuming the English teachers would "fix" existing content area pieces for the portfolio. After teachers became familiar with the requirements of our writing portfolio (and realized that the KERA reforms were not going to go away), many subject area teachers became the biggest advocates for the writing process, designing assignments that led students through writing in stages.

Many teachers redesigned assignments to take students' writing and learning processes into account. As one said, "I think a lot of times before you do an activity, you can get students to write down what they think is going to happen and to make a proposal, and then a lab can be part of a prewrite. Gathering your data, etc. And then, doing something with it. Whether it's real-life writing or whether it's more creative writing."

Curriculum Development and Whole School Assessment

Through reading and discussing student portfolios, many teachers began to see how writing can be used as a tool for learning—not only demonstrating learning for assessment, but also for making a connection between curriculum and the worlds of writing students will enter after secondary school. In other words, the portfolio assessment was broad enough that it made room for new things in the curricula of various disciplines, instead of crowding things out, as external assessments so often do. And because

teachers assessed the student work instead of an external testing agency, they discussed the assessment in terms of their curriculum, what goes on in class. And that dialogue has spurred curricular change for some teachers and departments.

Because it was clear that overall the weakest selections in the portfolios were the required subject-area pieces, more teachers began to take responsibility for improving their students' writing by assigning writing that expanded the students' involvement with the subject matter. They began to design writing tasks that were transactive, with a real purpose and audience beyond the teacher-as-examiner. There were far fewer "cookie cutter" writing tasks and far more real-world writing with student choice. Twelve of the eighteen content-area teachers interviewed reported changing their assignments. The comments of a science teacher were typical: "I do quite a bit that is different. The kids are more likely to write up their labs rather than just kind of do a fill-in form that we used to do all the time."

Many teachers redesigned assignments to take students' writing and learning processes into account.

Because transactive writing is included as one of the four required types (and the form must be a real-world form), it takes some imagination as a teacher. More subject-area teachers are excited about creating writing tasks that indeed become connections with what James Moffett calls the "universe of discourse" beyond the school. They are learning to adapt the traditional research papers into proposals, abstracts, oral presentations, multimedia presentations, instruction manuals, and position papers. They are learning to adapt traditional methods of testing to develop students' critical thinking skills and engagement with the content; they are learning to assign book reviews, feature stories, editorials, pamphlets, brochures, memos, business letters, recommendation letters, and application essays as writing within their curriculum.

For example, in Anne Buchanan's tenth grade general biochemistry unit on biomolecules, the writing grows out of clear subject matter expectations ("Students will analyze the relationship that exists between or among a compound's molecules and the physical properties of the compound"). But the culminating performance is a feature story portfolio piece instead of a multiple choice or short answer test. Frequent informal in-class writing lets Anne find out what content the students are learning during the unit. "I never give tests, because I don't need to, because I have this daily written interaction with my students. I know where they are, I know what they know. We have a discourse in class all the time."

Students choose a feature article topic from many available or anything else they think of related to the functioning of the kinds of molecules studied: fats (e.g., anorexia, steroids), carbohydrates (e.g., diabetes, athlete diet), proteins (e.g., antibodies, hair care), nucleic acids (e.g., genetic diseases). The students decide on their purpose and audience for the piece, as well. And they learn about what makes a good feature article from materials that explain the genre, give examples (e.g., ideas for leads), and ask guide questions. Students analyze professionally-written feature stories on science from magazines and then do the assignment in stages such as prewriting activities and, later, peer review.

Anne has similar materials for other genres such as the position paper (written by activist, industry, and government groups to influence science funding or policy) and laboratory reports (a far cry from the recipe or fill-in-the-blank reports). Says Anne, "I think that I'm probably really opposite in terms of most science teachers. I see writing as the ultimate important thing for the students because we have the dialogue back and forth every day. We try to do something based on what they write to me."

In an eleventh grade US History course, students study the impact of WWII on today's society and then write an article on some aspect of its impact on our lives today for a magazine devoted to WWII. (They read and analyze examples from such magazines before they begin.) The students individually decide on a topic and a genre (editorial, feature, photo essay, commentary, biographical profile, book or movie review, etc.). They do guided research on their topics and do prewriting activities to focus on a specific purpose and audience. They do peer reviews based on guide questions, and they have an evaluation rubric that adapts the general portfolio scoring

guide to the historical concepts being taught and the specific writing assignment. The writing assignment not only helps the students learn the historical material and concepts, but also apply it to their lives. In the process, they are also learning how to adapt what they are learning to audiences beyond the teacher in other genres. As a history teacher put it, "They're getting a whole lot more out of this than they would the usual research paper. I'd never go back to that. They like this better and so do I."

Some content-area teachers were (and are) concerned that writing will compromise their content, and these tend to view writing as an add-on, often unwelcome. But others are finding that using writing is "just approaching something differently," as a science teacher put it. "I don't feel that it's taken away from my content. I don't feel like I've changed the content of what I teach." Another was adamant that writing is a way of teaching content:

I pride myself—those kids that come back to me and they say, "You took me through that first three weeks of college chemistry." And I'm still going to do that. Now I may use writing to accomplish that goal, and I may lecture less, but you know, I'm not going to compromise [the content]. The writing will just be incorporated into that and I've got to figure out ways to do that.

Gradually, this dialogue about writing is beginning to affect discussions of curriculum within individual departments. One science teacher emphasized the importance for curriculum discussions in working with other teachers in whole school portfolio assessment:

When we do this whole scoring thing, we're working with a diverse section of teachers that we usually don't spend a lot of time with. So, that's good. Now we talk more within the department too about, well, what kind of writing assignment did you do, hoping to pick up triggers or ideas or something that we can do.

It is this kind of collegial dialogue about curriculum and pedagogy that holds the greatest potential for positive washback from assessment.

Teachers Learning Together—Collegiality for a Change

Whole school assessment was the one tool that brought teachers from across the curriculum (along with administrators) together in a common effort. As they addressed the needs of the writing portfolio,

they were discussing learning needs of all kinds: the need to critically engage students with the content as well as present it; the need to communicate for a variety of purposes and audiences as well as for the teacher-as-examiner. A dialogue about learning started that almost certainly would never have occurred without whole school portfolio assessment.

Indeed, whole school portfolio assessment using the common holistic scoring guide gave teachers a common language for talking about writing, among themselves and with students. There is strength when an art teacher can address the lack of authentic purpose and audience in a piece of writing. There is strength when a science teacher can discuss idea development and a physical education teacher can discuss lapses in organization. As a science teacher put it, "The kids are starting to see that . . . writing is not something that you just do in English. Writing is something that you're going to do in all different areas."

Finally, whole school involvement in the writing portfolio tore down some of the barriers between the English department and the other departments, and between teachers and administrators. It provided a common ground for all as educators and writers, where they could learn together. A science teacher expressed it this way: "You're seeing some of the work that is being done. You also get to know the teachers better. This is a big school and you get the little pods. And we don't . . . think science is any better than others, but in our daily contact, these are the people we contact more than anyone else."

Another science teacher added:

I think it's wonderful. I think that it was a real injustice to the English teachers the years that we did not help them [assess portfolios]. Because it's an all-type project. I mean, we should all participate in it and I've learned a great deal and feel fairly comfortable about my assignments. . . . It was a very good experience.

Several teachers echoed this science teacher. "You feel more it's a team effort. And so I think that's good. I think it's brought us together."

Indeed, some English teachers are also learning from their colleagues in other areas to value writing that is important to students in many fields but has not traditionally been well understood or valued in English. As one English teacher put it, "I see now that literary criticism is really a kind of technical writing for English . . . Scoring the portfolios

with the other teachers has given me a broader kind of thinking about writing.”

Conclusion: Change for the Long Run

Paul Laurence Dunbar High is still seeing the long-term effects of whole school assessment, through this new teacher awareness of writing. The writing portfolio is no longer looked upon as the sole responsibility of the English department. Many teachers work seriously at assigning writing that is purposeful and meaningful in terms of teaching—not just assessing—their content. And many have attended professional development workshops on writing geared to their needs such as a summer workshop on technical writing. In several departments over the past year, a group of teachers has worked together to construct writing assignments that help students engage with and answer the essential content questions of a unit, so that writing grows out of content.

However, some teachers are more excited, more knowledgeable, more invested than others. As another science teacher put it, “There is definitely more writing. There is definitely a better attitude about it now than when we first started. But there are still quite a few teachers who are very uncomfortable with the whole process.” The staff has learned that it takes time—years—to accomplish fundamental changes like making writing an integral part of learning across the curriculum. And there may never be a 100 percent buy-in. But the culture of the school can change, nevertheless, when there is a greater awareness of writing as being important in every discipline, not just English.

Of course the ultimate goal is more—and better—student writing for learning as a result of the discussions and changes whole school assessment created. There was. The portfolio scores did not soar to the top of the scale, but the difference in the writing ability of the students from one year to another was gratifying to the staff. The biggest change was that the bulk of the portfolios improved from Novice to Apprentice, and the Novice writing was definitely better, closer to being Apprentice. The number of Proficient and Distinguished writers increased as well. It's likely this happened because teachers were assigning more meaningful tasks and possessed some shared terminology and experience of writing across the curriculum to guide their students.

The teachers have also perceived some improvement in student writing in the school. All agree

that there is more various writing. Twenty-four of the twenty-six teachers interviewed believe that student writing has improved, and as one technology teacher put it, “It's just like anything else; they've just put more emphasis on it and they just kept doing it. And the more they do it the better they get.” Teachers sharing expectations, as one science teacher said, have made student writing “more organized. They're able to put things together better—the transitions are better. Their vocabulary I think is improved. [I] Don't think their spelling is improved. But they're just more aware of what they need to put on paper.”

These changes grew out of the state-mandated teacher assessment of a flexible-content portfolio assessed by a common rubric, but in any school teachers from one department or across the curriculum can grow by getting together to discuss student writing, as Spandel and Stiggins have delightfully shown in their book, *Creating Writers: Linking Writing Assessment and Instruction*. The questions are these: How can we teachers learn from each other how to value student writing? How can we improve teaching and learning through our dialogue with each other about student writing? Teacher-assessed portfolios across the curriculum have given us a valuable start in finding the answers.

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